MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY
OF WASHINGTON ELECTIONS

January 2003

The Secretary of State is developing a specialized database to maintain the integrity of Washington elections. The voter registration database, a centralized holding cell of voter information, will minimize opportunity for fraud and improve the management of voter registration records. In short, building the database will improve the election process for every voter.

State's Request

At the Secretary of State's request, the 2002 Legislature cleared the way for Washington to build this statewide voter registration database with the passage of **House Bill 2332 (HB 2332)**. The legislation, which also requires this report, will minimize opportunity for fraud by:

- Identifying duplicate voter registrations.
- Identifying suspected duplicate voters.
- Screening for felons who have lost their right to vote under the law.
- Providing up-to-date voter signatures.
- Providing online access for County Auditors.
- Canceling voter registration for people who have moved out of state and surrendered their Washington driver licenses.

Federal Request

Due to serious voting problems in Florida during the 2000 Presidential Election, the United States Congress, in 2002, passed the *Help America Vote Act (HAVA)*. Though Washington shared none of Florida's problems in 2000, HAVA will impact voter registration in this state. In addition to minimizing opportunity for fraud, HAVA will require states to:

- Create an elections plan with counties. (After the plan is finished, states may apply for federal money for meeting certain requirements in HAVA.)
- Create a new federal election authority.
- Phase out punch-card voting.
- Improve voting systems.
- Improve ballot access for the visually impaired and disabled.
- Improve management of voter registration lists.
- Develop a "single, uniform, official, centralized, interactive, computerized statewide voter registration list." According to HAVA, the state must also create a "single system for storing and managing the official list of registered voters."

- Coordinate with the Washington State Department of Licensing and the Federal Social Security Administration on voter-identification checks.

- Follow required timelines for implementation and the promise of federal money.
  States must implement the voter registration system by January 1, 2004. (A waiver allowing implementation by January 1, 2006 may be granted.)

- Be ultimately accountable, instead of counties, for the voter registration process. This will shrink the number of responsible parties from 3,000 nationwide to 54, including States and territories.

Washington's current system does not comply with these federal mandates. To follow the new law, Washington will need to spend time and money. Other states of similar size have spent between $6 million and $18 million to build such systems. It is also very clear federal mandates causing major changes and expenditures are required, whether federal appropriations become available or not.

Understanding how Voter Registration Works in Washington

Voter registration is the heart of the democratic process. Without it, election officials would not know where voters live, where to locate polling places, or how many ballots to prepare. Registration lists allow the public to identify voters and to assist in policing the process. Each citizen has a right to vote once in a given election. Registration information helps ensure one vote for every citizen and is shared with election authorities through the voter registration process.

Currently, Washington citizens may register to vote via the mail, the Department of Licensing (through the Motor Voter program), the state's agency-based voter registration programs, or voter registration drives. A citizen must provide a name, residence address, date of birth, and sign an oath verifying eligibility to vote. Generally, more registration activity occurs prior to even-year elections than odd-year elections. Activity peaks in October of the Presidential Election years.

Technology

Although Washington maintains the master list of all 3.2 million registered voters in the state, each county maintains the "official list" of its own registered voters. The database, which acts as the central nervous system for election management, is the single, most important tool used by the county. It contains all information related to mail ballots and each citizen's voting record. Most counties keep the list on a computer system as a subsystem of an election-management system. This allows the county to process all voter inquiries, ballot requests, and candidate or issue campaign requests. The system often contains digitized signature images used to approve petitions and verify signatures on absentee ballot envelopes.

The registration files are equally important to the state. For twenty years, Washington has received copies of voter registration files twice annually. These files are used to build lists of potential jurors and to draw membership in the state's Salary Commission. The Secretary of State uses these files to improve signature checks on initiatives and referendums.

Maintenance

Maintenance of the voter registration file is a year-round function of a county elections department. New records are added. Records of the deceased and those who have moved are removed. In addition, information on eligible voters is continuously updated. The content of the average voter registration file changes at a rate of 15 percent in any given year. The rate is much higher in years with partisan elections and peaks during Presidential Elections. It is also much higher in urbanized countries, colleges, and jurisdictions with military bases. In those counties, mobility can run as high as 25 percent.

Why Washington is Prepared

Because of Washington's progress in the area of voter registration and technology, the state is more prepared than many to implement these new requirements.

Over seven years, the Secretary of State has created and improved a modern, centralized system to check signatures on petitions. A centralized, signature-checking system was driven by a desire to economize and improve the process used to verify signatures during the initiative and referendum process.

When the state began automating this process, telephone modem access was used to link to county-voter files. As the project evolved, counties compiled computer files, with signature images attached, and stored them in an Olympia database.

Over time, the Secretary of State and County Auditors improved the system to include list comparisons and address updates. This system now:

- Offers county-to-county list comparisons.

- Assists in the search for duplicate registrations and multiple voters.

- Assists in the search for felons who have lost their right to vote under the law.

Challenges

As the new state and federal requirements are implemented, Washington will face many challenges. For example, there has been very little coordination between state and local government in the area of storage for voter registration files. There are 39 counties in Washington and each has its own computer system. Many counties use the same software, but configure that software differently. Some counties have developed their own systems entirely while others greatly modified commercial systems in-house. Creating a single database to accommodate a variety of file formats will be difficult.

Washington has few options available for its new voter registration system. Originally, the Secretary of State planned to study all voter registration systems utilized in the nation. Certain states have already developed centralized voter registration systems. Some still run on mainframe computers. Other states store the entire file electronically. However, HAVA restricts our options and requires a fundamental change in Washington's voter registration structure. Because of the provisions of HAVA, the state's central, voter registration file will now exist as the official record for the state and each county. This will require amending RCW 29.07.010 (4) which establishes the County Auditor as the chief custodian of the official registration records of the county. (Additional amendments to existing election law are likely as the final plans for a statewide, voter registration system are formalized.)

Meeting Needs

The Secretary of State wants to ensure that the new laws are meaningful and benefit every voter. We recently gathered a large group of voter registration professionals and general-information users for a series of brainstorming sessions. Our group included state and county election officials, elected County Auditors, legislative staff, representatives of the League of Women Voters, labor, the business community, computer professionals, political parties, campaign companies, and other interested parties. *(See attached list of participants.)*

The group operated under the following basic principles:

- Maximize participation of eligible voters;
- Meet requirements in HAVA without reducing citizens' opportunities to register and participate;
- Maintain limitations on commercial use of voter registration data;
- Maintain availability of voter registration data for political use; and
- Develop the best system for Washington voters.

The group identified several characteristics that must be addressed in the new system, such as:

- Peak demand load.
- Strong election management tools.
- System availability 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Separating election management tools from the voter registration database to give counties the freedom to design election management systems appropriate to their needs.

Ultimately, the group arrived at three possible scenarios for Washington.

Options

The first is what is called a "batch" model. In this structure, the counties continue to maintain the voter registration files with frequent uploads of information to the central database managed by the state. Frequency of these uploads would increase from biannual to daily and demand more communication between the state and every county. **The first model** appears to be the most easily accepted because it requires the least change and arguably less funding. However, it is very likely that this model will not be possible under the new federal

The Secretary of State and County Auditors are a proven team. We developed a signature-checking system efficiently and at minimal cost. In fact, many times our improvements paid for themselves.

BATCH MODEL
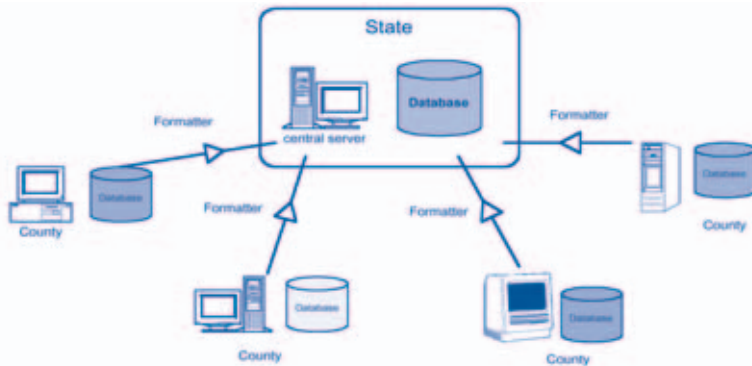
Each county has its own system, which synchronizes periodically with the statewide system. This approach is appealing because it allows counties to retain voter registration systems they already have in place. **However, this approach does not meet the new federal regulations.**

Using this model, the counties access state records but only make changes for their systems. The state and local systems are kept in sync with daily file exchanges. However, the technical challenge of aggregating data from diffuse systems is that it's prone to error and burdensome to counties. This system does not allow systemic prevention of registration in multiple counties, thereby enabling multiple records for the same voter.

MONOLITHIC MODEL
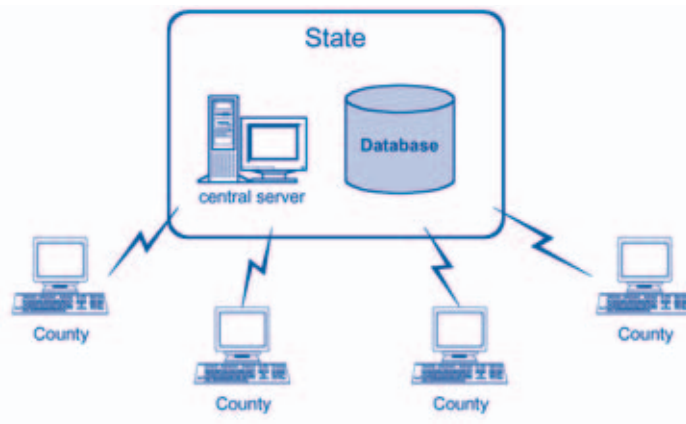
The state maintains a single, centralized voter database. The state hosts the database and software on a central server, and counties access the information through a secure network. A highly reliable network infrastructure must be in place, since any network outage can disrupt the ability of one or more counties to access the voter registration files during critical time frames. A significant portion of the cost of installing this model can be in providing infrastructure.

States differ in system operations but frequently all reports, voter ID cards, poll books, etc. are produced in a central location and then distributed around the state. Counties may access any registration record in the state but are only allowed to make changes to the registration records for voters in their jurisdiction. **This structure clearly meets the requirements of HAVA.**

COMPROMISE MODEL
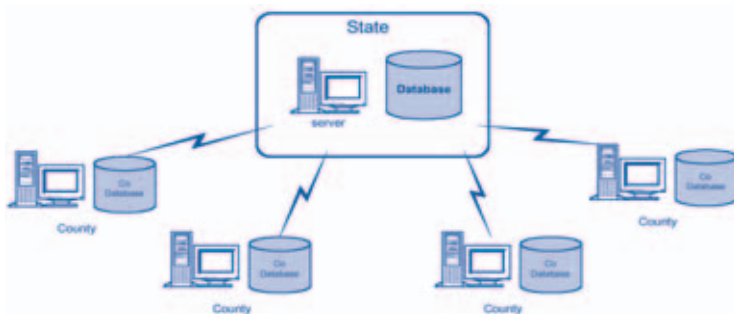
Each county has its own server hosting the common statewide software with that county's unique local data. The local servers synchronize with a statewide database through a secure network. The reliability of the state's network infrastructure is not as critical as it is for the Centralized State-wide System since the counties are able to continue to access their local registration records in the event of a network outage. However, the ongoing maintenance of so many servers and related computer equipment around the state can be a significant drain on resources. All states currently using this model allow counties to produce their reports, voter identification cards, poll books, etc. at the county level. Counties usually may access any registration record in the state but are only allowed to make changes to the registration records for voters in their jurisdiction. **This model also meets the new requirements in HAVA.**

regulations. Federal regulators are asking for a more homogenized system in terms of software and procedures than this model can offer. (A diagram is featured on page 4.)

The second approach uses the "monolithic" model. Under this model, the state would have sole responsibility to manage the voter registration lists. The state would own all equipment and maintain all information on a central database. This means data entry, ballots, poll books, voter identification cards and other information produced by the system would emanate from the state and all costs would be born by central voter control. This option is not the most popular among our special focus group. That is because counties currently benefit from the ability to serve their customers locally. In addition, the group feels long-distance communication with voters is not an effective selling point for a new system.

The third model, a "decentralized" statewide database, is the most likely solution for Washington to meet the new federal guidelines. In this model, the state offers a central database that provides all counties access in real or nearly real time. The counties have identical copies of the database at the local level that they can update at will and which are constantly replicated in the central, official database. The structure of the third model provides automatic file backup for the counties and allows for all of the benefits of cooperative data management. Because of the decentralization of the model, it allows for customization of election management systems for each county. Customization will be important in working with one type of database but many different ballot

During the final phase, the group focused on the many responsibilities associated with voter registration. The result is the chart below which lists county and state responsibilities in this area. As documented, most responsibilities are shared by the counties and the state.

State Responsibilities

List match for duplicates
National voter registration act reporting

Shared Responsibilities

Election management	Candidate filing
National change of address (list maintenance)	Military/overseas voters record retention
Petition checking	Data security
Definition of voter information	Accountability to the public
Mailing lists (parties, campaigns)	Voter outreach
	Cost management training
Transaction history (voter history)	Research into voter records
Inter-county transfer of VR	Language requirements
Voter information on web	Change management
NVRA data entry	US postal service relations
Determining the official list of voters	Providing a unique identifier
	Risk management
	Liability
Data audits	System reliability

County Responsibilities

Addressing precinct assignments
Absentee ballot management
Poll books
Local district boundary management
VBM election management
Acknowledgement notices (voter ID cards)
Data entry
Audits
Voter registration challenges
Special ballot research and processing
Poll worker management

counting and absentee management systems. Furthermore, systems may be altered to accommodate varying county size and other differences.

Benefits of Working Together

There are several benefits derived from the state and local offices working together on voter registration issues. The improved quality of voter registration lists reduces opportunities for voter misbehavior and improves customer service to the public. The voter registration system required in HAVA provides "real-time" checking of voter records. This allows a search for duplicate registrations anywhere in the state prior to adding a new voter to the list. This removes the chance of duplicate registration and allows voters to transfer their existing registration wherever they move in Washington. In addition, an opportunity is created to have a single voting record follow the voter throughout his or her voting history within the state.

The new system improves the accuracy of the voter registration list. Improved accuracy will result in less maintenance and save money. The statewide, voter registration system will have built-in eligibility screening mechanisms. These include Department of Licensing (DOL) residency cross checks and connection to the Social Security Administration (SSA) file of Social Security Number files. The new system will also have efficiency benefits in the Motor Voter program conducted by Office of the Secretary of State and DOL. Much of the information on DOL's driver file will be imported into the voter registration system which will reduce data entry time.

Because voter lists will be well maintained under the new system, they may be used as a resource for screening ineligible felons. Cooperation between the Secretary of State and state Department of Corrections (DOC) will ensure that only eligible citizens vote. Eventually, there will be opportunities for state-to-state comparisons of voter files to ensure that voters are registered in only one state at a time.

Further benefits of the system include more efficient signature checking on petitions, improved election statistics, and additional service and fiscal savings for small counties. Many of Washington's smallest counties do not have digitized signature systems. These systems allow for speedy access to signature images needed to verify petitions and absentee ballots. Counties that have installed these systems have realized significant savings in time and money. Unfortunately, many of the smaller counties cannot afford the capital expenditure required to purchase such a system; the statewide voter registration system will provide them with this valuable tool.

What's Next?

The next step is to write the state plan required in HAVA. The plan will set performance measures and goals for the new system. (It will be critical to get input from the counties on the final structure of the system.) The plan must be submitted to the newly-created Federal Election Assistance Commission in 2003. The Commission will use the plan to evaluate each state's performance. Under HAVA, an advisory committee must be created to develop the plan and a strict timeline must be followed.

Key elements of the preparation for drafting the plan include:

- Finding the appropriate funds and funding source.
- Making a complete inventory of existing systems in each county. Identifying capabilities and needs.

- Working with the Department of Information Services to complete a requirements analysis.
- Identifying the "core information" needed for each voter.
- Deciding whether to build a system or purchase and modify an off-the-shelf system.
- Identifying every possible resource for system design.
- Involving existing vendors and database vendors that have not worked in elections before.
- Determining future system management structures.

Conclusion

Despite the limited number of options for Washington available through HAVA, there is still room for innovative solutions. The system must be secure, robust, and redundant. System development will involve the Office of the Secretary of State, the Washington State Association of County Auditors, county election offices, and the Departments of Licensing and Information Services.

The state and counties will work together much more closely in the future. A cooperative and collaborative process is critical. System development will involve the Office of the Secretary of State, the Washington State Association of County Auditors, county election offices, and the Department of Licensing and Information Services. Currently, we are well into the planning process and expect to work with the counties every step of the way.

All told, our work ahead will be challenging. However, the Office of the Secretary of State views HAVA as a tremendous opportunity to provide efficient and accurate service to every voter and maintain integrity in the election process.
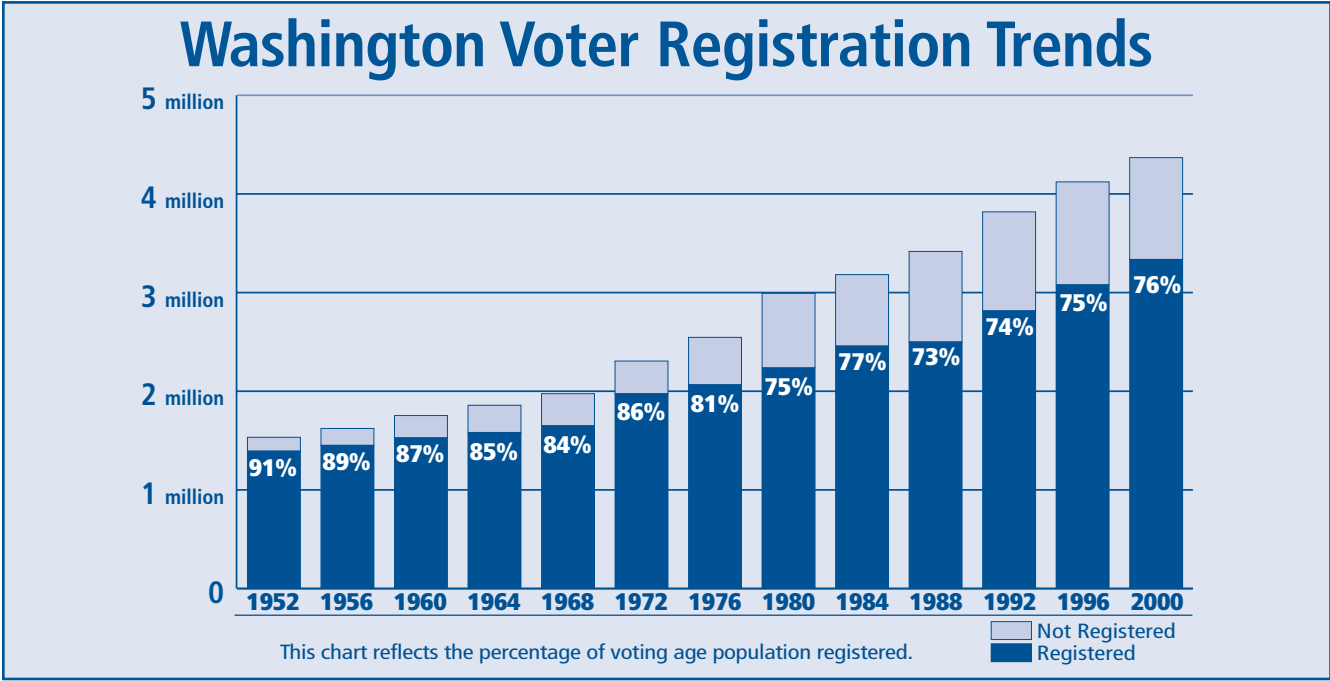
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“ The Help America Vote Act will move elections into the 21st Century. I commend Congress and the President for recognizing the importance of our democracy by investing in the elections process with this sweeping legislation. It's time for the state of Washington to do the same.

– Sam Reed, Secretary of State

Washington Voter Registration Trends

This chart reflects the percentage of voting age population registered.

Legend: Not Registered / Registered

Behind the scenes, the mechanics of the elections process will run smoother, reduce opportunity for fraud, and improve access at the polls for voters with disabilities. Our hope is that this legislation will build faith in the system and ultimately increase voter turnout. ”

--Dean Logan, Director of Elections

Washington Secretary of State
SAM REED

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